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When the Putnam's IMAX theatre first opened its doors in 2002, the plan was to give audiences a big-screen educational experience they wouldn't forget. Yet in the past six months, you're nearly as likely to catch *Beauty & the Beast* or *Harry Potter & the Prisoner of Azkaban* at the Putnam as you are an educational opus along the lines of *Everest*. Hollywood is now sensing the money to be made in the IMAX format, and as a result, says Putman Museum Director/CEO Chris Reich via e-mail, "The original business model upon which our attendance was based has completely changed."

From its inception, the IMAX format's theatrical revenue came through its educational endeavors. "Over the years," explains the Putnam's IMAX Theatre Manager Dean Fick, "IMAX has had great success in non-commercial venues like museums, including the Smithsonian Institute and the Museum of Science & Industry. It was relatively easy to get films produced, and it was a great way to present educational content in a way that had a lot of impact. It also made a great deal of economic sense for these institutions, because you can put an IMAX projection system in a theatre for a couple million dollars and you can easily change films. It's not so easy to change exhibits."

"Yet over the past decade," Fick continues, "IMAX has been gravitating towards commercial expansion, building theatres in commercial multiplexes, and at the same time, they've been wooing the Hollywood studios into creating more Hollywood *content* for the IMAX theatres."

Reich concurred, responding, "The large-format film industry has changed dramatically in the past five years. When the Putnam first commissioned its IMAX theatre in 1999, [traditional] Hollywood films were not even considered. It was the introduction of Disney's *Fantasia* to the giant screen in 2000 that introduced this new concept for IMAX screens."

Beyond that, added Reich, "The number of commercial IMAX screens has grown throughout the world as a complement to the more traditional, institutionally based large-format theaters. The growth of these properties has spurred the development of more commercial 'product' to satisfy their needs."

Looking at domestic box-office tallies for recent IMAX endeavors, it's difficult to ignore the potential financial windfall. Consider: When *The Polar Express* opened nationally last November, its opening-weekend box-office take was $23 million, and unless it continued to play *unusually* well, the movie wasn't likely to recuperate its reported budget of $170 million during its initial run.

Two weeks later, the film opened on 61 additional IMAX screens – not including the Putnam – on which it earned an estimated per-screen average of more than $45,000.

As of March 6, 2005, *The Polar Express* had grossed $162.7 million, and according to Box Office Mojo (http://www.boxofficemojo.com) , more than one-quarter of that came from IMAX screens.

Hollywood executives pay attention to numbers like those, and so do IMAX executives.

For the Putnam's IMAX theatre, this entertainment alliance between Hollywood and IMAX means a new, rotating schedule of museum-friendly edu-tainment mixed with Hollywood entertainment, and Fick says the move makes great business sense. "It certainly adds to our attendance. We notice that people who ordinarily wouldn't come to the IMAX – those who wouldn't see *Aliens of the Deep*, for instance – *will* come to see *Spider-Man 2*." He adds that with *The Lion King*, which played at the Putnam in 2003, "we had close to 1,500 people a week. We had *Harry Potter* here for six weeks last fall and added some 7,000 people. That's not bad for a film that's several months old. So we consider the addition of Hollywood fare a success as far as enlarging our audience."

Some wondered, though, whether the museum's recent inclusion of Hollywood fare for its IMAX lineup had more to do with changes at the Putnam itself than with changes in the industry. After all, the Putnam – which in 2003 improved on its 2002 attendance with 236,380 visitors compared to the previous year's 234,005 – did see those numbers drop to 201,780 in 2004, and in January of last year, the Putnam laid off several full-time IMAX employees, none of whom has been reinstated to their former position.

Yet, as far as 2005 is concerned, Fick says that "we're holding steady with projections," and Reich says that the financial situation for the Putnam is "definitely better" than it was in January of 2004. He adds that although Hollywood offerings have done well at the Putnam, the institution's financial upswing "doesn't really have anything to do with the IMAX booking Hollywood movies," noting that, "We have greatly increased our use of volunteers and part-time workers, which has helped enormously, and which better meets the demands of the IMAX's constantly changing film schedule."

As for whether revenue from Hollywood releases is, in the end, actually greater than that for most educational offerings, Reich states that it's difficult to compare attendance for something like *Beauty & the Beast* to a more inherently educational film. "Hollywood releases are generally

booked at the IMAX for a shorter period of time," says Reich, citing *Beast*'s six-week run. With audiences faced with a time limit to see Hollywood releases on the IMAX screen, "those films' per-screen averages are almost invariably higher."

Hollywood has clearly become an unavoidable factor in the presentation of IMAX productions, yet the Putnam's IMAX will remain, first and foremost, a *museum* attraction. "The traditional IMAX films offer a wonderful experience for schools, as well as families and the public at large," says Reich. "The Hollywood films simply enhance our schedule and often provide uniquely different ways for us to call attention to history, science, and popular culture."

As for the Putnam's future lineup, Fick reveals that upcoming IMAX fare is scheduled to include the documentary adventure *Jane Goodall's Wild Chimpanzees*, the "extreme" documentary adventure *Adrenaline Rush*, and *Magnificent Desolation: Walking on the Moon*, an educational 3D presentation fostered by Tom Hanks.

Whose film, *The Polar Express*, the Putnam is hoping to have booked *this* winter.